

THE YELLOW TICKET

BY

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The Yellow Ticket

THE scene is in Moscow, just where the wide Boulevard meets the Tverskaia. In the middle of the way is the statue to Puschkin; on the right hand, walling the street, the great monastery to the Passion of Christ. This is the favorite promenade of the gay-plumaged night-birds of Moscow. They walk up and down the street in the glare of the shops, and then cross and go down the Boulevard, shadows drifting from darkness into the light, and again from the light into darkness.

One night in the early winter of 1912 a young girl was among them, warmly but dowdily dressed, like a well-to-do provincial; yet she scanned the passers-by as the professionals scan them, and walked slowly as they walk, though it was no time for loitering. The winter had set in early, and already in November the air was keen with frost, and the stars glittered like diamonds.

A young man came hurrying by: as he passed he caught sight of the girl's profile and eyes as she lingered before a shop window. He stopped at once and went over to her.

"Are you waiting for anyone?" he asked.

The girl replied quite quietly:

"No one in particular."

"Will I do?" he asked gaily.

She threw a quick glance at him and nodded.

His manner changed with her acceptance. For a moment he put out his hand as if to take her by the arm, and then drew back.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to dine to-night with some relatives; I'm late already," he hurried on, "but I must know you; I never saw anyone so pretty. I can't stay to-night; I must go now; I can't get out of it. You'll meet me to-morrow night, won't you?"

The girl shook her head.

"But why not?" he exclaimed. "It's absurd. I want you; you have taken my fancy, and I want to know all about you. Do promise me you will go home now and be here to-morrow at the same time."

The girl shook her head again: "I can't promise."

"But why not?" he insisted. "It's absurd. Suppose I pay you for the evening?"

He threw open his fur coat and took some notes out of his waistcoat pocket.

"No, no!" cried the girl, shrinking away; "I don't want money."

"Don't want money?" he said. "Don't be silly. What else are you

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here for? Now look," he went on imperiously, "here are ten roubles. Now go home, and I'll meet you here to-morrow night at half-past seven exactly. Will you promise?"

She shook her head; but he seized her hand and shut the note in the palm.

"I must go," he cried hurriedly; "but I'm sure you'll be here to-morrow; you're too young to cheat." And he hurried away.

The girl didn't turn to look after him, but stood for a moment undecided, then took out a little purse and pushed in the banknote and resumed her casual walk, now glancing at the passers-by, now with apparent coquetry stopping in the full glare of some shop window, loitering.

A little while later another man accosted her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She looked up as the strong voice reached her.

"Nothing."

"And your name?" he went on, drawing her nearer still to the glaring light in the window.

"Rebecca," she said, looking up at him.

"A Jewess!" he cried. "I might have known it with that coloring and those great eyes. But you don't look Jewish, you know, with that little straight nose; and you are new at this game, aren't you?"

The girl's eyes met his for a moment.

"Yes," she replied.

"Will you come and dine?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"Are you free for the night?"

She paused as if swallowing something before she nodded.

"Come on, then," he said; "we'll go and have some dinner and a talk."

The next moment he had stopped a droschky that was swinging by behind a black Orloff, and had helped the girl to a seat.

"To the Hermitage," he said, and the little car whirled away down the street.

The Hermitage in Moscow is a very convenient establishment. It has over two hundred suites of rooms, from five roubles for the night to fifty; from one room with a bed in it and the ordinary exiguous toilet requirements, to a suite of sitting-room, bedroom, and a bath-room so large that a couple may swim about in it. It has sixteen entrances, too, and as many exits, so there is small chance of meeting anyone you don't want to meet.

The man, evidently a well-to-do merchant, selected a good

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number, and as they followed the waiter into the corridor a little bell tinkled, and continued to tinkle till they got into the sitting-room and the closed door shut out its ringing.

“What’s that bell for?” asked the girl.

“Oh, that is one of the customs of the place,” said the man, taking off his gloves and laughing to the waiter; “isn’t it, Ivan? The bell rings just to warn people not to leave their rooms till the new comers are installed, otherwise one might meet inconvenient people in the passages. Everything is well arranged in the Hermitage, that one can say for it.”

The girl nodded her head, smiling, and stood expectant in the middle of the room. Hurriedly, but as one accustomed to it, the man ordered a good dinner, and as the waiter left the room he turned with astonishment to the Jewess:

“What!” he cried, “you haven’t taken off your hat and coat yet?” and he came toward her as if to help her.

At once she hurried over to the nearest glass, put up her hands, and took off her little fur cap and began arranging her hair; then slowly loosening her coat, she folded the heavy garment carefully, and laid it on a chair.

The man went on talking the while:

“Lucky it was I met you; didn’t know what to do with my evening. A man I expected to see failed me and I was at a loose end, when I caught sight of your pretty face. But what age are you, Rebecca? You look very young,” he added, as if remarking her extreme youth for the first time.

“Sixteen,” she said.

“Really!” he cried. “I should have thought nineteen; but then you mature more quickly than Russians, don’t you?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose so.

They were interrupted by the waiter who brought in dinner, and for the first course or two little was said. As usual, they had the meat first and then the fish, Russian fashion. When they had finished the fish, the man’s appetite being half sated, he found time to notice that the girl had hardly touched the food.

“Come, come,” he cried, “you must eat.”

“I can’t,” she said; “I don’t feel hungry.”

“That is no reason: you must eat,” he insisted. “We live by eating; and you must drink too,” and he poured her out another glass of sweet champagne. “You like champagne, don’t you?” he asked.

“It tastes funny,” she said. “At first it went up in my nose and tickled. I never saw it before.”

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“Really!” he exclaimed, “then you must be new at the game. How long have you been in Moscow?”

The girl seemed to hesitate: looked at him and looked down.

“You needn’t tell me if you don’t want to,” he said huffily.

The waiter interrupted them again.

In a few minutes more the meal was finished. The man lit a cigarette. The waiter left the room for the last time, the pair were alone.

“Come, Rebecca,” said the man. “Come and give me a kiss.”

The girl came round the table and stood beside him. He put his arm round her and drew her down to his knee. She seemed awkward, hesitant.

“Where is the kiss?” he asked, smiling.

The girl turned to him, and kissed his cheek.

“Good God!” he cried, “you don’t call that a kiss, do you? What is the matter with you?” and he put his cigarette-holder down on the table, and, winding both arms round her, drew her to him and held his lips to hers.

She yielded stiffly, reluctantly. After kissing her for some little time the man pushed her away.

“Do you call that kissing? Why, you can’t kiss at all. What’s the matter with you? Give me a proper kiss.”

Again the girl pecked at his cheek.

“Look here,” he said, “if I displease you, tell me; but don’t go on like this; it’s silly.”

He rose, looking at her crossly, his vanity smarting.

The girl noticed for the first time when he drew himself up that he was fine looking, above middle height, and powerful: a man in the prime of life, thirty perhaps, with strong face, clean-shaven but for the small fair mustache.

“You dislike me?” he went on, putting his hands on her shoulders, “tell me the truth?”

“No,” she shook her head.

“Then why don’t you kiss me?”

“I have kissed you.”

“But you know that isn’t the proper way to kiss,” he said.

“Are there many ways of kissing?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Of course,” he said. “This is the right way,” and, taking her head in his hands, he crushed his lips on hers. “Now give me a good kiss, as if you liked me.

With glowing face, the girl gave him another peck.

“What do you mean?” he said, sitting down. “Come, tell me. I must know. Is it pretense with you, or dislike?”

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The girl shook her head.

Suddenly her troubled, hot face gave him a new idea: "You're not a novice, are you? How long have you been in Moscow? Where do you live? Come, tell me." And he drew her to his knee again.

As the girl sat down she put her right elbow on the table behind her to keep herself upright and, as luck would have it, snapped the amber and meerschaum cigarette-holder. As she started up the man picked up the cigarette-holder, smiling.

"I don't mind," he said, "it doesn't matter. I will put the cigarette further away on a plate."

"I am so sorry," cried the girl.

"It's nothing," said the man. "But tell me when did you come to Moscow?"

The girl stood before him with her hands clasped in front of her, for all the world like a schoolgirl; indeed, she was hardly more. She had evidently made up her mind to speak.

"This afternoon," she replied.

"What! for the first time?" he asked.

"For the first time," she repeated.

"Where do you live?"

"Here," she said.

"Here?" he repeated; "what do you mean?"

"It's a long story," she said, unclasping her hands and quickly clasping them again.

"Tell me it," he said. "We have time, and I should like to hear it all," and he drew her toward him.

And standing there by his left knee she told him the story.

"I came from Gorod by train. It is a long story." Encouraged by his "Go on," she began again.

"I wanted to study at the University. Only three Jewesses are allowed to come from Gorod to Moscow. The three who won had been studying for years and years; the youngest of them was over thirty. Only three are allowed each year to leave the town, and there are thousands of Jewesses in Gorod. I was fourth, so I would have had to wait another year or perhaps longer. But as my mother was a widow I soon coaxed her, and she gave me the money and let me come to Moscow to study."

"Why do you want to study?" he asked; "what's the good of books? They only tire pretty eyes."

The girl stared at him in wonder; the question was so unexpected, she had to think to find an answer; she began confusedly, eagerly:

"I want to know heaps of things, I'm so ignorant," she burst out.

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"I want to be like the great women who have done things in the world. Oh, I can't say what I want to say; but I—you know, to be ignorant to-day is stupid, oh, I—"

He nodded, hardly interested, wishing to get the story.

"And so you came to Moscow?"

"This afternoon," she said; "it was already getting dark. I went to a hotel, but at the hotel—I had taken a room and everything—before they sent for my box to the station they asked me for my passport, and when I told them I hadn't a passport they changed their manner at once, said they had no room for me, I had better go. . . ."

"I went to a cheaper hotel and showed them that I had money; but again, as soon as they found I had no passport, they turned me out into the streets. . . . I did not know what to do. I spoke to a lady, and she answered rudely, treated me as if I were a beggar. So at last I spoke to one of those women who walk up and down the street. She was kind to me; she told me I could not get a lodging anywhere in Moscow without a passport; it was not possible. But even when she found out I was a Jewess she was kind, told me I was in a bad way, for I should not be able to get a passport, because the police don't like Jewesses. The only thing for me to do, she said, was to get a Yellow Ticket of the—you know—the Yellow Ticket of the prostitute!"

The man whistled—"Whew!"—a long, low note.

"She said, as it was early, she would go with me to the police bureau, and on the way she told me that it was quite easy to get a Yellow Ticket. I had only to go in boldly and ask for one and pay fifteen roubles, and come away. If I had money and wanted to study, I did not need to—do anything, but with the Yellow Ticket there were hundreds of houses where I could get a lodging; otherwise they'd let me freeze on the street. . . ."

The girl paused and looked at him.

"A prostitute is welcome, but not a Jewess, in Moscow—Christian Moscow," she added as if to herself.

The man laughed and put his arms round her.

"You are delightful," he said, laughing again. "Well, what happened then?"

"I went into the station," the girl went on, "and asked one of the policemen where I was to get a 'Yellow Ticket.' And he tried to kiss me and then took me into the Inspector's room, and the Inspector came and began questioning me. When I told him I had just come to Moscow he tried to kiss me, and I wouldn't let him, so he said he wouldn't give me a Yellow Ticket unless I let him kiss me; well, I let him; but then he wanted . . ."

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"At last I ran out of the place without the Ticket, and found that my friend had gone away. After a little while I found another woman, again a woman of the streets, and told her what had happened. She told me the only thing she could think of was for me to get a man and go home with him, and then get him to come with me in the morning to the police bureau, and a Yellow Ticket would be given to me at once.

"The Yellow Ticket," she explained gravely, "is a sort of prize in Moscow!"

"I dare say we can manage the Yellow Ticket," said the man carelessly. "But are you really a novice?"

The girl nodded.

"You would rather not begin the game?"

She nodded quickly, eagerly.

"What an adventure!" he cried, stretching out his arms. "Do you know, it is rather lucky you have fallen into good hands, Rebecca? You interest me. Strangely enough, I don't want to kiss anyone particularly who doesn't want to kiss me. That is strange, isn't it?" he asked, laughing.

"No," she said, "it seems to me quite natural."

"That is because you are a girl," he replied, smiling. "It isn't natural to most men. Come, now, do you want to go in there and sleep alone? What would you like me to do? Let you sleep alone and then help you to get the Yellow Ticket in the morning, or go in there with you and have a good time?" and he nodded to the bedroom.

"Alone," she cried. "Do you mind? But then, where are you to sleep?" she added ruefully.

"Oh, I can sleep there," he said, pointing to the sofa; "I have often slept in worse places. I will read some papers I have got in my overcoat, and you can go in and go to bed." He spoke as if dismissing her, and the girl went hesitatingly toward the bedroom door. At the door she turned and looked at him. He nodded, smiling, and waved his hand to her.

"That's all right," he said; "have a good sleep."

"I'd like," she said, coming back a little way toward him, "I'd like to kiss you."

"Come along," he said, and she came back to him slowly across the room, and this time she yielded herself to him and left her lips on his. He lifted her away at last, and said:

"Now?" half interrogatively.

The girl cried quickly:

"Good night; thank you so much; good night," and, running

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across the room, disappeared into the bedroom and closed the door.

For a moment or two the man looked at the door, smiling; then he got up and went to his overcoat, took out some papers, lit another cigarette, and settled down to read in the armchair.

An hour later there was unbroken silence in the room. The man got up, stretched himself, took off his collar and coat, undid his boots, arranged his big fur overcoat as covering, then went to the door of the bedroom and listened: all was still. He put his hand on the handle: he could hear his heart throb.

After a pause he turned away and threw himself down on the sofa. In ten minutes he was asleep.

* * *

Shortly before eight o'clock the man woke, got up and opened the windows, rang the bell and ordered breakfast, went into the bathroom and bathed his face and hands. While the waiter was laying the table, he went out hurriedly. In an hour he returned and went over and knocked at the girl's door. A moment later he heard her voice, and went in. She was standing fully dressed before him.

"Slept well?" he asked.

"Thanks to you!" she nodded, and the deep eyes dwelt on him.

"Been up long?" he asked.

"Two hours," she replied.

"Oh, you early bird! Now come and have breakfast. I have news for you."

"I have news for you too," she said, following him to the table. "This is a funny place."

"Why do you call it funny?" he said, taking up some salt fish on his fork.

"Because I came in while you were sleeping," she said, "and tried to go out. I wanted to buy you a cigarette-holder for the one I broke, but when I got to the entrance I was stopped. They told me I couldn't go out without you. It appears I might have robbed you, or murdered you, so I was escorted back here and told to wait. It is a funny place, the Hermitage."

"Do you know, you are a dear," he said, "to have thought of that holder," and he stretched out his hand to her. She came now willingly and stooped her dark head to his fair one and kissed him.

"That's better!" he cried. "You are making great progress. Fancy! You have learned to kiss quite nicely in twenty-four hours; that is very

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quick."

"Very easy," she said saucily, "when the heart teaches the lips."

"So you do like me a little?" he asked.

Again the eyes dwelt on him.

"Yes," she replied simply.

As if trying to shake off an unwonted emotion, he got up and said in his ordinary quick tone:

"I have been out trying to do something for you," and he took out his pocketbook and laid it on the table.

She noticed that his nails were more carefully kept than her own; she liked the evidence of care.

"You interested me last night," he said, "and I wanted really to do something for you, and persuade you to like me, I don't know why."

"That was good of you," she said, coming over and standing beside him; "but I do like you," she added softly.

"I thought perhaps you might," he said, putting his arm round her, "but, curiously enough, I wanted you to be free, quite free; so I went out and got you baptized, you little Jewess," and he turned up the pretty, glowing face with his hand and kissed her on the lips.

He went on speaking with mock gravity:

"Your name now is Vera Novikoff, and not Rebecca Rubinovitch."

"Vera Novikoff?" the girl marveled.

"Yes," he said, taking a paper out of his pocketbook. "Everything can be bought in Moscow, and I went out to buy a passport for you, and I bought a passport this morning in the name of Vera Novikoff, and as Vera Novikoff you can live in Moscow wherever you please, how you please, unmolested."

"How good of you!" she cried. "I knew you were good. But it must have cost you a lot of money?"

"No," he said, smiling into her eyes. "No, strange to say, Vera, it was cheaper than the Yellow Ticket. You said the Yellow Ticket was fifteen roubles; I paid twelve for this. It is cheaper, you see," and he held it toward her.

The girl took it in her hands, and said, simply, slowly, as if to herself:

"Cheaper! Yes, it costs less than the Yellow Ticket"